

## Bondi to Fight Pill Mills Hard

Attorney General Pam Bondi laid out plans Thursday to combat “pill mills,” asking the Legislature for tougher penalties to prosecute doctors at pain management clinics who dole out huge amounts of prescription medication to drug dealers and addicts.



“We are the epicenter for the country for prescription drug abuse,” Bondi said at a news conference with other state and federal officials.

Bondi’s office has drafted legislation that would fine doctors \$10,000 for violating mandated standards of care when prescribing pain medication. It would also make it a third-degree felony to fraudulently register as a pain clinic and create a tiered penalty system for doctors who don’t perform a physical exam before dispensing more than 72-hours worth of controlled substances.

There is a place for pain clinics, which can provide necessary care, law enforcement officials said. But according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, there are 1,167 “pill mills” operating in the state. The number could be higher, officials said, because some clinics are masquerading as urgent care centers or other medical facilities. An FDLE official also said that the state has tracked 1,268 people in Florida who have died in 2010 because of prescription drug overdose.

Pain clinics have risen in popularity over the last year, particularly in South Florida where billboards grace the side of Interstate 95 giving toll free numbers to clinics. Drug users have driven in from Kentucky, Tennessee and other southern states to buy from Florida’s lucrative prescription drug market because they can turn around and sell them in their home states.

But as media attention centered on the problems in South Florida, the market began to spread with pain clinics popping up in Orlando, Jacksonville and the Panhandle, said FDLE assistant commissioner Ken Tucker. State police can’t keep up with the pace at which clinics appear and then start selling to customers, he said.

And the prescription drug abuse frequently leads to other problems and crime, Tucker said.

“As they become more and more addicted, they are unable to hold a job,” he said, referring to the drug users.

The pill mill issue has been on lawmakers’ agenda for the past few years. Last spring, the Legislature passed a measure that prohibited physicians from dispensing more than a 72-hour supply of a controlled substance without a prescription, with a potential penalty of up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine.

The state Board of Medicine has also developed rules that create standardized care practices at pain clinics, limit the amount of prescriptions written and require that doctors perform physicals on all

patients seeking pain medication. The board approved the rules in November, but because they have a financial impact, lawmakers must give them final approval when the legislative session begins in March.

Bondi said while the Legislature is examining new laws to help further crack down on pill mills, the agency is also working on forming partnerships with state and federal prosecutors to try to better get a handle on the cases they can prosecute. They're also relying on advocates and parents to publicize the issue.

Karen Perry, a West Palm Beach woman whose son Richie overdosed seven years ago on prescription medicine at age 21, formed N.O.P.E. or Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education following the 2003 death of her son. Police knocked on her family's door one January morning informing her and her husband of their son's passing.

They later discovered he was addicted to a cocktail of drugs, having used Ritalin, Xanax, codeine, Demerol, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin. It had only been a short time earlier, she said, that they had dropped him off at college.

"Just three years later, we had to face the unthinkable task of bringing our son's body home for burial," she said.

Bondi's proposed changes to the law are still in draft form, but an aide said that it is likely the House Health and Human Services committee will take it up as a committee bill. State Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, will likely be the Senate sponsor.

Law enforcement officials are also waiting on the creation of a new prescription database that was supposed to be set up by Dec. 1, but was delayed because one of the vendors who did not win the Department of Health contract to create the database, protested the department's decision to award the contract to another company. Bondi and other public officials are hoping to get the database up and running quickly because it will better help them track users of pain medication like codeine, methadone, amphetamines, anabolic steroids and ketamine.

By Kathleen Haughney  
The News Service of Florida